

CLAIMS:

1. A method of screening a potential customer and assigning an account number to the potential customer over a computer network, the method comprising the steps of:

providing a user interface for a potential customer to access an automated seller facility, the access taking place over a computer network, the user interface allowing the customer to enter customer data for qualification checking by a seller;

receiving the customer data from the customer in the automated seller facility via the user interface and over the computer network;

performing an initial screening of the potential customer to determine whether the potential customer is qualified to purchase products/services from the seller; and

issuing an account number if the potential customer passes the initial screening, thereby allowing the potential customer further access to the automated seller facility to make an offer to purchase products/services from the automated seller facility while the automated seller facility performs a complete screening.

2. The method of claim 1 further comprising the steps of performing a complete screening in order to authorize the potential customer to actually purchase products/services from the automated seller facility if the potential customer is so qualified, accepting the potential customer's offer to purchase products/services only

- 5 if the potential customer passes the complete screening and thereby only entering into a contract with the potential customer once the seller is satisfied the potential customer is qualified to purchase the products/services, and declining the potential customer's offer to purchase if the potential customer is not qualified by the seller.

3. The method of claim 1 further comprising the steps of receiving an existing account number and providing a pre-populated user interface in response thereto having existing customer data therein, and requiring verification of the existing customer data by the potential customer, thereby bypassing the initial screening step.

4. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of periodically querying accuracy of customer data from existing customers, and updating a database if any changes are found.

5. The method of claim 4 wherein the customer data comprises information provided by the potential customer during a previous transaction with the seller, the seller having stored the information in the database.

6. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of sending the account number, together with a password, and an electronic contract to the potential customer after the customer has passed the initial screening.

7. The method of claim 1 further comprising the steps of segregating products/services into restricted and unrestricted product categories within the automated seller facility and wherein the initial screening comprises determining whether the potential customer is an authorized buyer of products from the restricted product category, and checking the customer data to clear any red flags, such as inconsistent billing and shipping addresses.

8. The method of claim 7 wherein the restricted product category includes at least one of: medical equipment, product/service information pertaining to medical equipment, and medical equipment service.

9. The method of claim 1 wherein the complete screening comprises clearing any red flags, including checking whether the potential customer has included a method of payment with an offer to purchase products/services, and if so, determining whether the method of payment is an authorized method of payment for that customer.

10. The method of claim 1 wherein the complete screening comprises checking whether the potential customer has changed any terms and conditions defined by the seller in an offer to purchase products/services, and if so, ensuring that such changes are satisfactory to the seller.

11. The method of claim 1 wherein the user interface includes a plurality of required fields and wherein the method further includes the step of confirming that each required field in the user interface has been completed, and if not, restricting access by the potential customer until all required fields are complete.

12. A computer readable medium having stored thereon a computer program which, when executed by one or more computers, causes the one or more computers to:

5 acquire customer information at an automated seller facility from a potential customer through a user interface;

perform an initial screening of the potential customer;

issue an account number if the potential customer passes the initial screening, the account number allowing the potential customer to further access the automated seller facility; and

10 conduct a complete screening while simultaneously allowing the potential customer to place a product/service order.

13. The computer program on the computer readable medium of claim 12 wherein the product/service order is a purchase offer in which the potential customer offers to purchase products/services, and wherein an acceptance of the purchase offer occurs only after the complete screening of the potential customer indicates that the
5 potential customer is authorized to purchase the products/services.

14. The computer program on the computer readable medium of claim 12 wherein the automated seller facility has unrestricted and restricted product categories, the unrestricted product category comprising products/services which may be purchased by a general group of buyers, and the restricted product category comprising
5 products/services pertaining to medical equipment.

15. The computer program on the computer readable medium of claim 14 wherein the potential customer must be an authorized buyer of restricted product category products/services, and is further defined to include licensed health care professionals, those entities that employ licensed health care professionals, and
5 authorized health care distributors.

16. The computer program on the computer readable medium of claim 12 wherein the complete screening comprises clearing any red flags, including at least checking whether the authorized potential customer has provided a method of payment with the product/service order, and if so, checking whether the method of
5 payment is an authorized method of payment.

17. The computer program on the computer readable medium of claim 12 wherein the complete screening comprises at least checking whether the potential customer has changed any terms and conditions in the product/service order, and if so, ensuring that such changes are satisfactory to the seller.

18. A network-based system for screening a potential customer and assigning an account number to the potential customer comprising:

an automated seller facility having a supplier network of computers including:

5 a first tier computer system programmed to:

receive customer data from a customer accessible computer;

confirm that the customer data is complete;

initially screen the potential customer to allow further access;

issue an account number if the potential customer is determined

10 qualified, wherein the potential customer is allowed further access to the automated seller facility; and

a second tier computer system programmed to receive the customer data from the first tier computer system and perform a complete screen of the potential customer while the potential customer is allowed further access to the automated seller

15 facility to place an offer to purchase products/services from the automated seller facility.

19. The network-based system of claim 18 wherein the automated seller facility has unrestricted and restricted product categories, and wherein the second tier computer system is programmed to determine whether the products/services that the potential customer offers to purchase are from the restricted product category, and if

5. so, the second tier computer system is further programmed to check that the potential customer is an authorized buyer of such restricted products/services.

20. The network-based system of claim 19 wherein the restricted product category comprises at least one of: medical equipment and product/service information pertaining to medical equipment, and the authorized buyer is further defined to include licensed health care professionals, those employing licensed health care professionals,
5 and authorized health care distributors.

21. The network-based system of claim 18 wherein the complete screening comprises clearing any red flags, including checking whether an authorized potential customer has identified a method of payment and determining whether the method of payment is an authorized method of payment.

22. The network-based system of claim 18 wherein the second tier computer system is a globally-accessible computer network having global and regional processing centers.

23. The network-based system of claim 18 wherein the seller defines terms and conditions pertaining to a sale of products/services to the potential customer, and wherein the second tier computer system determines whether the

- potential customer has changed any of the terms and conditions, and if so, takes
- 5 action to ensure such changes are satisfactory to the seller.